

Concept of Brahman according to Sankaracarya

N. Gnanakumaran.

Sankarācārya advocates the doctrine of Advaita which means non-dual (a + dvaita). He is not the first Philosopher to introduce or establish the Philosophy of Advaita. There were many teachers and scholars before him who spelt out a theory which was a forerunner to the Advaita Vedānta. In this respect, Kasakrtsna, Dravidacanya, Bhartrhari, Brahmanadin, Bhartiprapanca and Brahmadutta are only a few of the notable savants. But it is unfortunate that the complete works of all the above mentioned scholars are not available to us, though from other indirect sources we could find out that the idea of Advaita had these works as its origin. Sankara's Paramaguru (great teacher) Gaudapāda's Māṇḍūkya Kārīkā may be considered as expounding the first formulations of Advaita Vedānta as a systematic doctrine.

Sankara follows the footsteps of Gaudapāda and develops Advaita into a systematic theory. He explains the theory of non-dualism philosophically. Non-dualism is the ultimate reality in that the reality is one that is ineffable, undifferentiated and unqualified Brahman. If Brahman is the only reality, then all the perceived multiplicity of the world must partake of unreality. The world, Ātman, Īsvara, etc. are various appearances of Brahman according to Sankara. These are not the ultimate reality which is non-dual Brahman.

Without undermining the ideas of the Veda and the Upaniṣads, Sankara combined his ideas with those found in these texts and explains logically his view of Brahman. Professor Shrivastava has rightly pointed out that Sankara honoured the Sruti and lost no effort in giving a cogent interpretation of the Upanisadic texts. At the same time, he did not take his stand on the authority of the Sruti alone, but admitted the note of reasoning in arriving at sound conclusions.¹

Various Upaniṣads have stated that Brahman is the absolute reality. The Mundaka Upaniṣad says, Brahman alone is all this.² The same concept is found in the Aitareya Upaniṣad in a reference which asserts that "in the beginning this was but the absolute self alone; There was nothing else."³ Prasna Upaniṣad also states that "I know the supreme Brahman thus far only, beyond this there is nothing."⁴ The same idea is spelt out in the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad as 'this One is the Lord of all; this One is Omniscient'; this One is the inner Director of all, this One is the Source of all."⁵ Chāndogya Upaniṣad says 'there is One without a second.'⁶

The two terms Brahman and Ātman are used as synonyms in the Upanisads. The word Brahman is used to denote the true self in the Chāndogya Upanisad.⁷ At the same time, the Taittirīya Upanisad uses the word Ātman to explain the Self. As far as the Upanisads are concerned, mostly the words Brahman and Ātman mean the same reality. The Māṇḍūkya Upanisad states 'this Ātman is Brahman',⁸ whereas, the Chāndogya Upanisad states that 'Ātman alone is all This.' The Brhadāraṇyaka Upanisad says that 'there is no diversity',⁹ and Ātman is the only Reality.¹⁰ Māṇḍūkya Kārikā explains that non-dual Ātman appears as different due to māyā, but there is no difference in Reality.¹¹ Moreover, the two terms are used more or less interchangeably in the Upanisads.

Gauḍapāda establishes the concept of non-duality in his Gauḍapāda Kārikā or Māṇḍūkya Kārikā. The only reality for him is one eternal Brahman. Duality is an unreal appearance. Non-duality is the highest reality.¹² Unconditioned Brahman is beyond space, time and causality. The Māṇḍūkya Upanisad says that 'all this is verily Brahman. This Ātman is Brahman'.¹³ The Ātman is none other than Brahman. Sankara wrote a commentary on the Māṇḍukyopanisad as well as Māṇḍūkya Kārikā to stress the importance of the non-dualistic concept.

In addition to this, the four Mahāvākyas - "Prajñānam Brahma (Consciousness is Brahman), 14, "Aham Brahmāsmi" (I am Brahman), 15 'Tattvamasi' (That thou art) 16 and "Ayam ātma Brahma (This self is Brahman) 17, confirm the absoluteness and the non-duality of Brahman. If Sankara has accepted the above mentioned ideas of the Upanisads, he has to explain the concept of Brahman more logically and clearly, without contradicting any Upanisads. In explaining the concept of Brahman, Sankara analyses the concept of reality in detail.

The word real is used to denote various meanings like changeless, independent, permanent, infinite and eternal. In addition to these, we use the word real in different ways to denote different meanings. Richard Brooks classifies the usage of real in the following way,¹⁸

1. real is genuine - as opposed to fraudulent or fake - Ex. real diamonds
real Rembrandt.
2. real is natural - as opposed to artificial - Ex. real pond.

3. real is non imaginary - Ex. real water or non illusory - Ex. real dagger.
4. real is used to mean lasting or permanent Ex. real satisfaction - real peace.
5. real is existent - 'sat' in Sanskrit.

According to Sankara, non-contradiction, unchangeability and eternity are the main criteria of reality. The impossibility of being negated or sublated by a subsequent experience is the necessary feature of the non-contradiction. Brahman is not contradicted by any experience. Brahman is the eternal, everlasting one and beyond any kind of change. When we say Brahman is the only reality, the things like table, chair, house etc. must partake of unreality, because they are changeable in character. Therefore, it cannot be compared with the reality of Brahman. In his commentary on the Bhagavadgītā, Sankara interprets that awareness which does not vary with its object is real; that which varies with its object is unreal.¹⁹ This assertion means unchangeability as a criterion of reality as far as Sankara is concerned.

A worldly thing like glass has a name and form. When we see a glass, we accept the reality of it. But if it breaks, from that moment the reality is at stake. It creates confusion in the criterion of reality. In order to explain this, Advaitin spoke about three stages of realities, namely Prātibhāsika, Vyavakārika and Paramārthika. From the Vyavakārika stand point, Sankara says that dream objects (Prātibhāsika stage) are unreal, though perceived as true objects such as the waking objects (Vyavahārika stage) are. Prātibhāsika stage is unreal because dream objects are contradicted by the waking experience of Vyavakārika stage, Absolute reality -Paramārthika stage, for Sankara, implies permanent existence. Prātibhāsika, Vyavakārika and Paramārthika are three levels of existence which could be said to be different degrees of reality, namely, illusory, empirical, and ontological realities. The waking experience is real and not unreal like the dream, because it is not contradicted by any experience. But ultimately even the waking world with its multiplicity and relations are contradicted by the experience of the non-dual Brahman. In the Paramārthika stage the experience of Brahman is not contradicted by any other experience. The non-contradictoriness is the essence of ultimate reality. It implies that the non-dual Brahman is the ultimate reality. The same idea finds itself in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad in a reference which asserts that "Satyam jñānam anantam Brahman."²⁰ Etymologically the word satya indicates an existing entity that is not sublated.

Brahman is sat, cit, and ānanda. The truth of knowledge consists in its non-contradictoriness. Brahman is absolutely real and the knowledge of Brahman is the only non - contradictory knowledge. All the empirical knowledge

is aprama. It is, therefore, to be seen that the knowledge of Brahman itself only has been accorded the perfection of reality. The absolute Brahman is the basis on which the world and other things are superimposed. Brahman has the character of everlasting eternal bliss (ānanda svarūpa). It is pure, absolute, infinite, motionless and changeless like the sky. It is the supreme, perfect and ontological reality. It is truth and universal consciousness. It is free from the limitations of time, space and causality. It is also free from all determinations.

All empirical reality or phenomena are not different from Brahman. Brahman is the only reality, even though all empirical phenomena are the effects of Brahman. In fact none other than Brahman can be the cause for these phenomena. Pañcīkarana Vārttika says that the one indivisible Brahman appears three fold through illusion and not in reality.²¹

Para Brahman is absolute reality, though Brahman divided as four caitanyas namely, Brahman, Kūṭastha Brahman, Saḡuṇa Brahman and Jīva Brahman or Jivātman.²² Infact these four aspects are one and the same. If we understand the real significance of māyā, there will be no place for confusion as to the oneness of Brahman. The Ātman and Brahman are one and the same, as can be found in the texts of the Upaniṣads. The Ātman is the Universal Self. It is the highest Self. But it appears as jīvas owing to avidyā or ignorance. Ātman cannot be doubted by anybody because the essential nature of the doubting itself stands as proof for Ātman's existence. It is almost like the famous argument of Descartes (cogito ego sum). While Ātman is non-empirical self, jīva is the empirical and phenomenal self. In other words, Brahman which identifies itself with the gross body is called jīva. Actually there is no difference between the Jivātman and Paramātman (Brahman). While Paramātman is the purest and the highest self, the Jivātman comes into existence due to the influence of māyā. Jiva's plurality is derived from oneness owing to ignorance.

Sankara uses the Pratibimbavāda to bring out the relation between the multiplicity of the Jivātman and the Paramātman. When the moon shines, it's reflections in various ponds, lakes and wells ensure as many appearances of the moon as there are ponds, lakes etc. In fact, it is only one moon which spreads the moon light. Real is one, but we cannot, at the same time, deny that the other reflections of the moon are more illusions or unreal. They are only the reflections of the real moon. But the reflections of the moon cannot be the same as the real moon. It is only Pratibimba (reflection). It is appearance. Likewise, the Jivātman also is only the appearance of the Brahman and it reflects Brahman. Without the real moon, there can't be any reflection of the moon. In the same manner without Brahman, there won't be the

reflection of the plurality of jīvas. The Ātman is one, but due to the upādhis, it appears to be several. Sankara refers to one of the passages in the Mundaka Upaniṣad which compares the Jīvātman with one of the two birds that eats a sweet fruit while the other merely looks on without eating.²³ The Katha Upaniṣad only figuratively says that both of these enjoy.²⁴ But ultimately, there is no difference at all between Jīvātman and Brahman.

In addition to this, Sankara uses the 'avachchedavāda' in order to confirm the above positions. Air and air space are one and the same. Air is everywhere. But due to the division and limitation, they appear as different from each other. The unity and identity of the Brahman and Ātman establish non-duality. Partibimbavāda and Avachchedavāda also indicate that Brahman and Ātman are identical. The Ātman is Brahman.²⁵ Gaudapāda explains the relation between the jīva and Ātman using the analogy of ghatakāsa and Mahākāsa. Between these two, the difference is only an apparent one like jīva and Ātman. Sankara cites the māvākyas to confirm the idea of the non-duality.

Brahman becomes transformed into Īsvara as saguna when It is linked up with māyā. Īsvara is the personal aspect of the non-personal Brahman. Īsvara is the highest Lord or God in the empirical life. Īsvara is the lord of māyā, as well as, of the jivas or souls. Māyā is the creative power of the lord. He creates, sustains and destroys the universe with the help of māyā. Brahman becomes creative through māyā.²⁶ Brahman alone has created the world.²⁷

The relation between māyā and Brahman is unique. Māyā resides in Brahman and functions in it. But Brahman is not affected by māyā due to the links, It has with māyā. Brahman fashions the multiple universe and selves by its own power of māyā which is deluded. The creatures are seeing expressions of reality and not the real existence.

Saguna Brahman is qualified by attributes and associated with māyā. Māyā is the power of energy.²⁸ But māyā is ontologically unreal. It is real enough to create the multiplicity of world appearances. Without māyā, Īsvara is inactive.²⁹ In the empirical life, Īsvara is more useful to enable a realization of the real nature of the Brahman. It is the first step in the yearning of the souls to attain the absolute truth. As the determinate Brahman, Īsvara is treated as a deity by devoted souls. In this way, Īsvara is more valuable and

useful in the practical sense. The world, Īśvāra and jivā are only empirically real. Without Brahman, Īśvara cannot appear. Brahman is the one and pure consciousness.

Kūṭastha Brahman is on a higher level than Saguṇa Brahman but lower than Para Brahman. Para Brahman will remain Nirguṇa Brahman without any association of māyā. Kūṭastha Brahmas associates with māyā as sakshin level. Nirguṇa Brahman is indeterminate and attributeless. Para Brahman is the supreme concept of the Vedānta, as well as the ultimate goal life.

Brahman is the highest truth and the only reality devoid of form and difference. It alone is permanent. If we accept Brahman as the only reality, māyā is not real, though its locus is Brahman only. It differs from Brahman upon whom it depends for its existence. Brahman is never affected or touched by māyā. Therefore māyā is dependent on him. Māyā is the power of Brahman³⁰ and it transforms itself into the world. Māyā cannot be proved by reasoning, because reasoning itself is the product of māyā. It is neither real nor unreal. Therefore it is inexplicable (anirvacāniya). Sankara describes that māyā is the most wonderful and cannot be described in words.³¹

There is no ontological reality other than Brahman. When we perceive the truth all the empirical appearances cease. Brahmajñāna destroys all the appearances and the effects of māyā and reveals the true nature of reality. Kena Upaniṣad says that anyone who knows this thus, he having dispelled sin, remains firmly seated in the boundless, blissful and Highest Brahman.³² The same idea finds itself in the Katha upaniṣad in a reference which asserts that one who becomes a knower thus of the indwelling self attains Brahman.³³ Mundaka Upaniṣad says that he who knows that Supreme Brahman becomes Brahman.³⁴

In Tattvabodha, Sankara says that the intuition of Brahman leads to the stage of jīvanmukti, the worship of Īśvara leads to the Kramamukti.³⁵ Therefore according to Sankara, if one realizes the knowledge of Brahman, he becomes Brahman itself,³⁶ At this stage only, one really comes to know, without any confusion the meaning of the mahāvākyas. When the Reality is fully realised, the māyā's veil that hides the truth vanishes and leads one to find Brahman, the highest goal of life.

Foot notes

1. Shrivastava, S. N. L. Sankara, and Bradley (1968) Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, P. 18.
2. Mundaka Upanisad, II-II-II
3. Aitareya Upanisad, I. I. I.
4. Prasna Upanisad, VI-7
5. Mādūkya Upanisad, 6
6. Chāndogya Upanisad, VI. II. I.
7. Ibid, VII. XXV-2.
8. Mādūkya Upanisad-2
9. Brhadāraṇyaka Upanisad, IV-4-19
10. Ibid, 2. 4. 3
11. Mādūkya Kārikā, 3. 19
12. Ibid, III-18
13. Mādūkya Upanisad, 2
14. Aitareya Upanisad, vi, iii, i, 3
15. Brhadāraṇyaka Upanisad, i, iv-10
16. Chāndogya Upanisad, vi-viii-xvi
17. Mādūkya Upanisad, 2
18. Brooks, Richard, "The meaning of real in Advaita Vedānta", *Philosophy of East and West* Vol.vxix. No 4 Oct, 1969 P. 385-392
19. Sankara, BhagavadGītābhāṣya, 2.16
20. Taittirīya Upanisad, II-I-I
21. Sankara-Pāncikarāna Vārttikam, 12
22. Swami Ponnambalam (Trans) Kaivalya Navaneetham, Madras. 1992 P. 126
23. Mundaka Upanisad, II. I. I
24. Katha Upanisad 1. 3. 1; 111-3-34

25. Mādṛūkyā Kārikā, 1-12; Kena Upaniṣad, 1-15
26. Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya 1. 1. 5; 11-1-28
27. Ibid, 1-4-25; 2-1-24 and 2-3-7
28. Ibid, 11-1-14
29. Ibid, 1-4-3
30. Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, 108; Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya 1-1-14
31. Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, 105
32. Kena Upaniṣad IV-9
33. Katha Upaniṣad II-III-8
34. Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad III-II-9
35. Tattvabodha, 7. 2
36. Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad III-2-9, IV-46 and Brahma Sūtra 1-1-4